Public Health Association of Australia: Policy-at-a-glance – Ecologically Sustainable Population for Australia Policy

Key message: PHAA will –

1. Advocate for an Ecologically Sustainable Population Policy for Australia that recognises space and resource limits based on a detailed carrying capacity evaluation.
2. Promote understanding of the complex socio-ecological factors that drive human impact on the environment including population size, patterns of energy and resource use and waste management.
3. Advocate for environmental and social justice in national and international population policies.

Summary: The planet is finite and over-population and over-consumption are tow driving forces that contribute to ecological degradation and human poverty. To promote current and future human health and wellbeing population size, resource use, infrastructure and service needs all have to be aligned within planetary carrying capacity. Australia has a responsibility to balance population size with resource constraints domestically and globally. Population policies need to be underpinned by the principles of equity and ecological sustainability to ensure environmental and social justice.

Audience: Federal, State and Territory Governments, policy makers and the general public.

Responsibility: PHAA’s Ecology and Environment Special Interest Group (SIG).

Date policy adopted: September 2016

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Ecologically Sustainable Population for Australia Policy Statement

This policy focuses on an ecologically sustainable Australia while recognising Australia’s role globally. This policy should be read in conjunction with the Sustainable Population Policy for Australia Background Paper and Ecologically Sustainable Human Society, Safe Climate, health Inequities and Women’s Health Policies.

The Public Health Association of Australia notes that:

1. Human population policies need to reflect the relationship between complex global socio-cultural and physical systems.

2. The global human population is rapidly increasing and is estimated to be over 9 billion by 2050.

3. Australia’s population is projected to increase to between 30.9 and 42.5 million people by 2056, and to between 33.7 and 62.2 million people by 2101, depending on the scenario used.

4. If unabated, this rapid global and national population growth will have significant social, public health and environmental implications for Australia.

5. An ecologically sustainable population is one that has an optimum population level for the planet. This means that the population lives within the ecological boundaries of Earth. Implicit in this is the concept of environmental and social justice, whereby an optimal level of health and wellbeing for all people is achieved through equitable access to opportunity, resources and energy.

6. An ecologically sustainable population depends dynamically on three factors: the population size, the affluence of the society and its impact on the natural environment (as a reflection of energy and resource consumption and waste production); and the efficiency of the technology e.g. to harvest energy.

7. Population dynamics also include changes to demographic structures such as the proportion of elderly and youth cohorts, fertility, morbidity and mortality rates, migration and urbanization. The majority of Australia’s total population (77.3%) are already living in cities with populations greater than 100,000 people which is a factor in increasing population impacts from crowding, infrastructure pressure and biodiversity loss.

8. Australian population growth is the net outcome of births, deaths, immigration and emigration. In recent years net migration has contributed more to population growth than natural increase (56:44% respectively, 2011-2012). Net overseas migration (NOM) peaked in 2008-9 at about 300,000 and in 2013-14 was 212,700. NOM comprises many subcategories; of these Temporary Visas comprise 52.2%, Family 12.2%, Skilled 13.8%. Special eligibility and humanitarian intake in 2012 was 1.2% of immigration (6150 people) and 2.5% of NOM (5984 people).
9. Despite the dramatic impacts that population growth is having on social, environmental and economic trajectories, Australia does not have an ecologically focused sustainable population policy. At a local and global level, Australia’s contribution to a sustainable population will require an ecologically sustainable population plan that needs to ensure that the growing population have all basic needs met (access to water, shelter, clean air, food, space and amenity) and policies and programs that support women’s access to reproductive health services, education and economic development, and promote democratic decision taking within society.

10. Population growth is not a solution to an ageing population. The benefits of population stabilisation are likely to significantly outweigh the costs of demographic ageing.

The Public Health Association of Australia affirms:

11. PHAA has a responsibility to advocate for the Australian government to establish policies that will balance Australia’s population with space and resource constraints nationally, and support such efforts internationally through Australian aid programs and funding.

12. Any population policy should recognise ecological and social determinants of health, be founded on principles of environmental and social equity, and emphasis limits to resource and energy use within a closed planetary system.

13. Ecologically sustainable population growth will be brought about not by coercive or punitive restrictions on fertility, ageing, ethnic discrimination or an end to immigration but by changes to immigration and welfare policies. These policies should support attitudinal change to engender a balance between personal choice and social and environmental responsibility.

The Public Health Association of Australia resolves to undertake the following actions:

The PHAA Ecology and Environment Special Interest Group and other relevant Special Interest Groups will advocate that relevant Australian governments:

14. Recognise that Australia’s prosperity and wellbeing depend on population size and our economy fitting within the space and resource limitations of our planetary system. Therefore, seek to quantify for various population increase scenarios, the per capita carbon emissions that will be required to meet Australia’s international emission reduction targets for 2020, 2050 and beyond.

15. Call for the development of an ecologically focussed Australian Sustainable Development Policy.

16. Oppose any government payments designed to encourage additional births.

17. Increase international aid for voluntary family planning and reproductive health services, and for improving educational access and workforce participation for women, in accord with the Cairo 1994

18. Include assessment of fertility and barriers to family planning access in aid programs as an integral element, and prioritise unmet need for family planning in each aid program.

19. Additionally, through leadership and material assistance, help mitigate the causes of conflict and ecological crisis that generate refugees, by contributing to global population stabilisation, and climate change mitigation and adaption.

The PHAA Ecology and Environment Special Interest Group and other relevant Special Interest Groups will advocate that State and Local Governments:

20. Ensure long-term economic, environmental and social impact planning projections for infrastructure are also used in population planning and decision making.

21. Ensure that planning instruments such as land zoning and infrastructure provisions do not accelerate population influx.

22. Undertake a carrying capacity evaluation, separately investigating each limiting resource (water, renewable energy, land, limits to liquid fossil fuel (peak oil) and impact (biodiversity and ecosystem functions, waste and pollution) for their effect on carrying capacity. How these affect future infrastructure and service delivery needs should be included.

ADOPTED 2009, REVISED AND RE-ENDORSED IN 2016

*First adopted at the 2009 Annual General Meeting of the Public Health Association of Australia. The latest revision has been undertaken as part of the 2016 policy review process.*
References